

Natural Resources Information Liaison: The Natural Connection

Mike Whatley, Manager, NPS Information Services Branch

Mike said it was an exciting time for the NPS and that there are close parallels between his group and that of the Fire Communication and Education Program. He talked about the organizational structure of the Natural Resources Information Division (NRID) and how the fire program and NRID shared many of the same concerns with stewardship groups. He said they have to have different ways of communicating with different target groups including the scientific community, the public and agencies. His organization is well designed with a communications umbrella that includes public affairs expertise, education specialists, and both interpretative and publications specialists.

Mike said his group had a lot of information that presented a challenge, such as in the fields of environmental restoration and fire. The traditional role of interpretation did not meet all their needs; they had to go above and beyond traditional interpretation (although traditional interpretation is still an important component in any communications and education initiative). Mike used fire as an example; it is a complicated issue to communicate and different fire situations require different communications scenarios.

The “one size fits all” role of traditional interpretation does not work in fire situations, as there are too many variables. One must develop fluid and dynamic processes that require one to fine-tune and to find *universal concepts* and *dynamics* for those various audiences. He defined a universal as the hull of a ship and a dynamic as the different sail configurations on the ship.

To be successful one has to match up the tools of communications to reach the different audiences. Those tools include defining the topic, the message, the audience and the technique. He gave an example of a prior initiative addressing acid rain with traditional NPS tools like campfire programs and flyers which are not wide reaching and hard to measure, versus a program that handed out buttons and maps at the Canadian border and achieved greater success.

His group has been tasked to develop a primer that would provide an overview on NPS fire policy that would reach different audiences and that his crew would share those findings with the Fire Education and Prevention Group.